DOI:
10.1080/10509208.2016.1192908

Document Version
Peer reviewed version

CHAPLIN'S AMERICA, THE ESSANAY AND MUTUAL YEARS: THE MAKING OF AN ARTIST IN THE PROGRESSIVE ERA, 1915-1917

Dr Harvey G Cohen
King's College London
Department of Culture, Media and Creative Industries
March 2015

A century ago, film star and comic genius Charles Chaplin, a British expatriate working in the American film industry, was in the midst of becoming the most famous person on the planet, the most richly compensated artist in the United States if not the world. From 1915-1917, he created indelible and hilarious films for the Essanay and Mutual companies that, on one level, could be enjoyed purely as entertainment by people of all ages. But one of the main reasons these films continue to delight new generations of viewers as well as commentators and biographers is that, like the best and most lasting comedic efforts,[1] there are nuggets of human truth, reality and even pain residing in the work underneath the surface.

It was during this period that Chaplin discovered the singular artistic voice that carried him through his four-decade-plus career. He confronted and subtly commented upon important controversial historic and political issues of the day within his comedy. He found his muse and connected with his audience most effectively when connecting his comedy with real life concerns that gave

[1] Some other examples: The Marx Brothers 1933 film Duck Soup (directed by Leo McCarey), Billy Wilder's 1957-1962 comedies (Some Like It Hot, The Apartment, One Two Three), Richard Pryor's standup comedy work of the 1960s and 1970s, Monty Python's Life of Brian (Terry Jones, 1983), Ricky Gervais and Stephen Merchant's The Office BBC TV series (2001-2004), etc.

voice and respect to the immigrant and working class audiences that made up the majority of the American film audience in this period.[2] Such views were not often represented in the mass media, then and now, and this paper argues that this phenomenon represented one of the reasons audiences identified with his films and his Little Tramp character in such unprecedented ways. Chaplin never makes obvious didactic political points in his films of this period, he never preaches about how people or society should behave, but his best films deal with the situations and consequences of American life during the era, wrestling with the same questions and disparities that politicians of the Progressive persuasion were trying to tackle at the same time. Instead of standing upon a soapbox and making a speech, Chaplin touches people's feelings in a way that no politician or op-ed columnist ever could. This article explores how he accomplished this in the context of the time.

Chaplin, probably the best business mind among the movie stars of the 1910s other than his eventual business partner Mary Pickford, knew who his audience consisted of in this period and played to them. He made his films to satisfy that audience, but this quality also aligned well with his own upbringing and experiences. With his absent father and often reclusive and perhaps

---

[2] Kathy Peiss, Cheap Amusements: Working Women and Leisure in Turn-Of-The-Century New York City (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1986): Chapter 6; Roy Rosenzweig, Eight Hours For What We Will: Workers & Leisure In An Industrial City (New York: Cambridge University Press): Chapter 8; Robert Sklar, Movie-Made America: A Cultural History of American Movies (New York, 1994): Chapters 1 and 2.

mentally ill mother, Chaplin (as well as his half-brother Sydney) was forced to grow up quickly and find ways to financially survive in poverty-stricken south London, slogging through exhausting music hall tours in the UK and eventually, vaudeville tours in the US to learn his craft. He was someone who struggled to better himself against huge odds and did, establishing his own unique artistic vision, developing his talent to its utmost. He rose up in the world much like the hero in the popular Horatio Alger stories of the period. Chaplin represented a singular combination of working-class urchin, and millionaire intellectual political scientist, there was no one else like him in the world, which helps explain the nature of his unprecedented work and appeal. As Constance Brown Kuriyama remarked in 1992, "even his earliest films contain familiar specters of Chaplin's youth—poverty, hunger, unemployment, menial work, loneliness, humiliation."[3]

While Chaplin portrayed the working-class / homeless / immigrant characters he played in a positive light, he pointedly did not carry a red flag (an image often associated with communism and socialism) in his films of the 1915-1917 period (though of course he would in Modern Times, accidentally, two decades later). In his films, Chaplin does not advocate overthrowing authority, but repeatedly he demonstrates how to outwit it with ingenuity, kick it in the pants and get away clean and with dignity, a dignity that outweighs the usual

[3] Constance Brown Kuriyama, "Chaplin's Impure Comedy: The Art of Survival," Film Quarterly (Vol. 45, No. 3, Spring 1992): 29.

poor and dirty outward countenance of the Little Tramp, a dignity that often sets the character apart from the middle- and upper-class characters he interacted with in the Essanay and Mutual films. For Chaplin, who resided during his early life in the highly stratified British class system, character clearly trumped status.

During the 1910s, the political, social and cultural landscape of the United States was changing rapidly. The political corruption, corporate greed and anti-regulation spirit of the Gilded Age during the last two decades of the 19th-century was giving way at least in part to a feeling of progressivism, of a concerted attempt to use activist government legislation to reform the unfair, unhealthy and inequitable legacy created by the late 19th-century American industrial revolution. Historian Robert Wiebe argued that by 1905, urban progressives had separated into two paths: while some stressed economic justice, opportunity and an attempt to rehabilitate democracy, another progressive stream emphasized a judgmental and domineering social control of the working class. At the same time, the strong and conservative middle-class respectability of 19th-century Victorian America, with its racist, nativist and misogynist overtones was being challenged as never before as an age of modernity slowly began to take hold in these years.[4] In his Essanay and

[4] Many books document the rise and effects of Progressivism, and the Gilded Age / Victorian mentality it replaced, including: Richard Hofstadter, The Age of Reform (New York: Vintage, 1955); Robyn Muncy, Creating A Female Dominion in American Reform*, 1890-1935* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1991; Robert H. Wiebe, The Search For Order, 1877-1920 (New York: Hill & Wang, 1967). Wiebe's point about the two post-1905 paths of Progressives is on pg. 176.

Mutual films, Chaplin operated as a kind of peaceful anti-Victorian force, artfully tearing the lid off of the middle-class' assumed propriety and showing the suffering, inequity and hypocrisy existing in the real world beyond the Victorians' and progressives' cherished ideal world.

After making his name and initial reputation with producer Mack Sennett at the slapstick-specializing Keystone studio, Chaplin signed with Essanay, a relatively new film company in 1915, who were using Chaplin to put their name on the industry map, but the company did not thrive for long after he left their studio a year later. He received a $10,000 signing bonus and $1250 weekly[5] – about $2 million per year in modern dollars. He enjoyed complete artistic freedom to make 2-reel roughly 25-minute short films, usually twice as long as those he made at Keystone, which allowed more creative latitude, characterization and subtlety in his work. At Essanay, he wouldn't be pressured to always conform to the manic, humorously violent house style Keystone was known for, although Chaplin still included plenty of slapstick in his Essanay output. But the financially conservative and frankly not very creative Essanay studio resisted his efforts to create a feature film, even though the motion picture market was clearly heading this way – 1915, after all, was the year that Chaplin's future business partner, director D. W. Griffith, released the box office-conquering, innovative yet flawed masterpiece feature

---

[5] David Robinson, Chaplin: His Life and Art (New York: McGraw Hill, 1985): 135-137.

Birth of a Nation.

It took time during these initial months of creative independence for Chaplin to develop his Little Tramp stage outfit and persona – he's nastier and less sympathetic in the Keystone films, reflecting that company's aesthetic. The character is arguably not perfected until the Mutual years. In his time at Keystone and during the initial months at Essanay, Chaplin's characters usually represented someone difficult to root for unless you harbored a sadistic streak, they were rather one-dimensional. He always seems ready to fight or hurt someone in the initial five films of the Essanay era. Though this independent anarchic spirit redolent of the Sennett years caught the attention of millions, we can now see that such a persona possessed a limited appeal in the long term, and Chaplin realized this limitation during the Essanay and Mutual years, and sought to expand his palette. Some of these nastier traits still exist when Chaplin grabs hold of the director's tiller for himself at Essanay, especially in such examples as His Night Out and His New Job (his first two Essanay films, from 1915), when the Tramp physically attacks pretty much everyone he comes into contact with and tries to seduce any woman in his path. These tableaux and characters are not realistic, they're caricatures with little weight; Chaplin obviously has not hit upon his own unique style yet. These films might capture our laughter at times, but they don't resonate emotionally. Such one-dimensional scenarios will gradually fade away by the end of the Mutual years, when the worst violence is heroically and obviously done by Chaplin to the people who most deserve it, as seen in Easy Street (1917).

Film scholar Charles Musser's research demonstrated that Chaplin's Little Tramp character was based on both a common stage archetype of the nineteenth-century on American and British stages, as well as on the clothes and manners of real tramps documented by academics and social workers of the period. Musser insists that Chaplin meant for his character to be true to life,[6] probably another reason that his films resonated strongly with audiences, and more evidence that Chaplin's best work tended to occur when he engaged with current social and historical situations. Walter Kerr, in his study of silent film comedians, argued that Chaplin's Little Tramp represented a "philosophical not political statement,"[7] but I would disagree, as my linking of Chaplin's films with political situations throughout this article would indicate. I'd side more with Musser's description of his character as a "gentleman tramp," especially after the rougher vision of the Tramp presented in the Keystone and early Essanay years that "avoids work and deflects punishment." And when one realizes what punishment and danger American workers in this period were facing, as will be documented later in this article, who could blame him for shirking work?

With The Champion (1915), his first great film for Essanay, Chaplin develops

---

6 Charles Musser, "Work, Ideology and Chaplin's Tramp," from Robert Sklar and Charles Musser, eds., Resisting Images: Essays on Cinema and History (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1990): 44-47.

7 Walter Kerr, The Silent Clowns (New York: Da Capo, 1990): 85.

a more sophisticated version of slapstick compared to Keystone's usual output, moving beyond customary pie fights, police chases, ogling of bathing beauties and so forth. The Tramp invades the world of boxing, a sport Chaplin enjoyed watching in real life. Perhaps the film hangs together especially well since violence and physical exertion is part of the prizefighting world. The situations feel more natural, less cruel and gratuitous than when he hit bystanders with bricks in a public park in His Night Out. Chaplin's best gags in The Champion showcase agility and invention and probably could not have been devised and performed in the same way by anyone else. He slides undetected under a policeman's legs, swings on metal rings gracefully while keeping a small punching bag in perpetual motion and kicking various gym residents, and makes exquisite fun of boxing rituals during the concluding championship fight. When he combines this kind of physical dexterity with emotionally powerful material in the later Mutual films, it will place him in a category purely his own. Even in The Champion, a hint of emotional resonance exists when the Tramp's dog saves him in the boxing ring at the very moment when it appears that he will lose the fight. The Tramp took care of the dog at the start of the film by sharing his light repast with him, it is touching as well as hilarious when the dog pays him back in the last triumphant moments of the film.

As Chaplin grew artistically, he took steps to insure the quality and sustainability of his work, another example that indicates the seriousness behind his comedic intent. Later during 1915, starting with the Essanay film Work, Chaplin backed away from the usual industry schedule of releasing a

film every 2 weeks; from here on in, for the rest of his career, he took his time crafting his creations.[8] Part of the reason for this bending of industry rules was due to the fact that his films pulled in so much money; Chaplin had more industry muscle than any movie star had yet possessed with the possible exception of Mary Pickford. Considering the huge financial success of his output, Essanay in the end had little choice but to give him leeway on his films' release schedules. Chaplin's characterization of the usual qualities of the working life, on display in Work, may have influenced this development as well; every character is on edge at all times in the film except for the Tramp; no one works together and all seem committed to doing as little as possible and sloughing off their duties onto others. In Chaplin's studio, he often worked 12 to 14 hour days or more crafting his comedies, his work ethic impeccable if rather obsessed.[9] In general, he tended not to do his job in a way that most others did. If the stressed and dysfunctional environment presented in Work symbolizes his vision of the usual work environment, he seemed to place himself above such situations in his real life, even while working well beyond an eight-hour day, as most industrial workers did during this period.

But the more important factor behind this shift was that Chaplin found that crafting more involved and sophisticated plots and antics took more time, especially since he served simultaneously as screenwriter, director, editor, star, and more behind the scenes. He strove for a higher standard, partly

---

[8] Charles Chaplin, My Autobiography (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1964): 173.

[9] For more on Chaplin's work habits during this period, see Robinson, 197-200.

because he thought such a standard would bring in more box office, partly because he had developed an effective work style that, as seen in the collected Chaplin outtakes featured in the 1983 documentary Unknown Chaplin (directed by Kevin Brownlow and David Gill), relied on hundreds of takes while he experimented with scenarios and routines, but perhaps mostly because he was thinking of posterity, he wanted his films and their appeal to last, to reward repeat showings, to deserve concentrated attention, to have appeal beyond their time.

Silent films in the 1910s were almost universally viewed by companies and audiences as only of fleeting value, useless after their first release. Chaplin didn't view his output in this manner. At Essanay, he refused to follow the company policy of cutting his films on the negative, insisting on more expensive positive copies being struck for editing purposes to preserve for generations the photographic as well as artistic quality of his films.[10] He seemed to have understood before the penny-pinching Essanay executives did that his films were not merely evanescent inspirations to laughter, here today and gone tomorrow, but artistic achievements that would be appreciated for generations if not forever. I would guess that Chaplin realized that keeping his negatives pristine would preserve his work more effectively for the long run, and of course we are still viewing his productions today when the great majority of silent films have been lost to history. Eventually, Chaplin would own most of his own negatives, and this emphasis on careful quality

[10] Robinson, 140.

ensured him royalties for decades. As Charles Musser documented, the film industry in the 1910s was undergoing a similar "process of rationalization" as Frederick Taylor installed in American factories as part of his strategy of achieving "scientific management" by having each worker concentrate on completing only a single task repeatedly for their daily workshift during the late nineteenth century. Henry Ford's construction of assembly lines in Ford auto factories in the opening decades of the twentieth-century also followed such guidelines.[11] Chaplin purposely turned his back on standardization that sought to streamline production and make it more predictable and economical; comedy and the creative imagination just did not work in that fashion, at least not for Chaplin.

While no strikes are pictured in Chaplin's films of this period, there exists a great deal of tension and comic violence on the topic of work, who does what, and the class issues surrounding it. The working life was often a perilous affair for the working class and immigrant audiences who patronized movie theatres in this period. In 1914 alone, 35,000 American workers were killed on the job and 700,000 injured in factories, and the risk these workers took on were not rewarded commensurately in a financial way, or subsidized by workmen's compensation, which was almost non-existent.[12] This kind of

---

11 Musser, 37.

12 Howard Zinn, A People's History of the United States, 1492-Present (New York: Harper-Collins, 2003): 326-328.

lopsided exploitation found voice in Chaplin's films, and represented another way that real life encroached upon them, enhancing their resonance.

Such concepts are perhaps most vividly illustrated in Chaplin's Work (1915), where the Tramp is mercilessly exploited by his boss during the opening minutes of the film. He is treated like a packhorse, hauling a 10-foot high pile of construction materials in a two-wheeled carriage up a long, almost impossibly steep hill while being whipped like a slave. And after that feat, the boss invites another worker to be pulled along in the carriage by Chaplin with no compunction. Carrying all of the painting accouterments into the client's house while his boss has a leisurely smoke, Chaplin trips on the bearskin rug, an artifact of middle-class respectability. Later, he kicks the bear's head. The symbolism embedded in this film is not subtle or pretty. Charlie will eventually take spectacular revenge on his boss and most of the household, but endures much punishment before that occurs. Such imagery makes the life of a jobless hobo look rather fetching. As biographer David Robinson argued, with this film, Chaplin "created a masterly and unforgettable image of the exploitation and humiliation of labor, the reverse of the Victorian ideal of the salutary virtues of work."[13]

In addition to rapacious bosses, middle class propriety is savagely mocked in *Work*: nothing is as it should be in what appears initially as the model middle-class home – the film features adultery, violence, the appliances don't work,

[13] Robinson, 145.

the place is a mess, the maid is either idly talking on the phone or pretending to be feather-dusting, the Father shoots at people with a gun with little warning, and at the end of the film, the previously seemingly respectable home is reduced to rubble, and it is the lowly Tramp, usually looked down upon by society, who sees middle-class reality for what it really is, and does more than his share to comically destroy it. In the opening shot of A Woman (1915), a middle-class-looking family assembles on a park bench, the father appearing unhappy until he attempts to go off and seduce a flirty woman, the mother dead asleep and snoring loudly, and the daughter, clearly frustrated, holding her ears. Not a tempting scenario to say the least; the notion of respectable family propriety is exploded here as well. No wonder that, as Chaplin scholar David Robinson reported, the film was charged with immorality in the press when released.[14]

Another challenge to conventional morality during the Essanay era was the Little Tramp's propensity for drinking alcohol in copious amounts. The largest and most effective temperance organization, the Anti-Saloon League, a largely middle- and upper-class organization, had been releasing propaganda nationwide concerning the evils of alcohol for more than two decades when Chaplin worked at Essanay, and they were close to succeeding in their quest to pass a constitutional amendment banning alcohol in the United States. Their main arguments in this temperance cause centered on appeals to the

[14] Robinson, *ibid*.

strengthening of the family unit and the uplift of the lower classes.[15] The Tramp's enjoyment of alcohol in the 1915 Essanay films (His Night Out, The Champion, A Woman, The Bank, etc) particularly in the daytime and during work hours, can be viewed as another rebellion against middle-class Victorian mores and the workplace of the period.

Interestingly, as several scholars have indicated in recent decades, the prohibition of alcohol in 1920 led to unintended consequences, particularly in urban areas, that almost certainly would have horrified the reformers of the Anti-Saloon League. The establishment of illegal speakeasies during the 1920s, where alcohol could be purchased, encouraged women to act more liberally when in those establishments (as well as in newly popular dance halls during the first two decades of the twentieth-century), wearing shorter skirts and shorter bobbed hair, and openly smoking – after all, just by stepping into speakeasies they were breaking the law, so a liberalization of behavior often ensued. Similarly, speakeasies also became places where gays and lesbians could be more open and public concerning their sexual orientation, and where African American jazz, a music widely seen as immoral and oversexualized during the 1920s, could flourish, often sponsored by organized crime.[16] Prohibition proved a key influence in the flowering of modernism,

---

[15] Jack S. Blocker, Jr., *American Temperance Movements: Cycles of Reform* (Boston: Twayne Publishers, 1989): Chapter 4.

[16] For more on this phenomenon, see George Chauncey, Gay New York: Gender, Urban Culture, and the Making of the Gay Male World 1890-1940 (New York: Basic Books, 1995); Harvey G Cohen, Duke Ellington's America (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2010): 54-59; Ted Gioia, The History of Jazz (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997):

and in many ways produced exactly the opposite moral effect Progressive reformers originally hoped to effect. Chaplin's Little Tramp in some ways presaged these rebellions.

Yet, despite the questioning of traditional family propriety in his films, starting in Chaplin's Essanay and Mutual period, especially in the case of characters played by Chaplin's real life paramour Edna Purviance, women were treated with more respect than usually the case in the world of comedies. They weren't shrill harridans or brainless beauties, they could recognize and even love the personal charm of the Tramp, even if his clothes and manners represented a constant affront to common conservative dignity of the day. They could act as co-conspirators in the dramas (e.g. A Woman, Shanghaied and Police from the Essanay period alone), they became more fully present as characters in Chaplin's films, just as women were making their efforts to not only support World War I during this period, but also gain the vote because they felt their voices needed to be heard on issues like the war, child labor, worker's issues, women's health, and others. American women were becoming more well-rounded in terms of their roles in an expanded social

---

123-129; Mary E. Odem, Delinquent Daughters: Protecting and Policing Adolescent Female Sexuality in the United States, 1885-1920 (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 1995): 1-2, 53-57, 185-189; Peiss, 6-9, Chapters 4 and 7; Leslie Woodcock Tentler, Wage-Earning Women: Industrial Work and Family Life in the United States, 1900-1930 (New York: Oxford University Press, 1979): 112; Lynn Weimer, From Working Girl to Working Mother: The Female Labor Force in the United States, 1820-1980 (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1985): 47-52.

sphere during the 1910s, more likely to be working outside the home, and less likely to be viewed as merely home-makers with no responsibility for activities in the wider world. They also sought their own culture and recreation when not working or taking care of the household and children,[17] a situation mirrored in the changing roles of women exhibited within Chaplin's Essanay and Mutual films. This trend of increased attention to women for Chaplin reaches a kind of apotheosis with his later feature A Woman of Paris (1923).

As historian Charles J. Maland pointed out, some at the time of this growing worldwide Chaplin-mania viewed his rise as a "social menace." A 1915 Detroit News article, for example, carried the headline "Low Grade Persons Only Like Charlie Chaplin and Mary Pickford, Says Pastor."[18] Considering the predominant Victorian morality of the period, perhaps the "menace"

---

17 For more on this topic, consult: Jane Addams, Twenty Years at Hull House (New York: Bedford-St Martin's Press, 1999 [originally published 1910]); Eileen Boris, Home To Work: Motherhood and The Politics of Industrial Housework in the U.S. (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1994); Chapters 1-3; Dorothy Sue Cobble, Dishing It Out: Waitresses and Their Unions in the 20th Century (Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press, 1991): 1-23; Annelise Orleck, Common Sense And A Little Fire (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1995): Chapters 1-4; Peiss, 7-8, Chapters 1-5; Zinn, 342-347.

One wonders if this relatively progressive portrayal of women, particularly the characters played by Edna Purviance, was linked to the fact that during the Essanay and Mutual years, Chaplin and Purviance were evidently a quite serious romantic couple.

18 Charles J. Maland, Chaplin and American Culture: The Evolution of a Star Image (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1991): 14-20.

description was in some ways justified or understandable. Just as the all-black and all-conquering James Reese Europe Band of New York City was heading up and completely renovating the US popular music scene, just as poets like Edna St Vincent Millay and activists such as Margaret Sanger were including women's voices on matters of adult sexuality,[19] Chaplin, through his films of the 1910s presented a view of the world that the mass media usually ignored, a slice of life that America and Britain's fading Victorian mindset would have rather kept hidden. But Chaplin grew up in a harsh poverty-stricken environment that showed the limits and even hypocrisy of Victorian ideals, such subjects resonated with him and the America and Britain he had experienced, and he must have known that such visions, though disturbing at times, would have also reverberated with his audiences.

The 1910s also saw a continuation if not a culmination of the Industrial Revolution's nouveau riche such as Andrew Carnegie, Frederick Law Olmsted and John D. Rockefeller Sr using their huge economic gains to create (supposedly) uplifting culture for the working-class to use, institutions like libraries, museums, opera houses, symphonies, parks – places that at the time one was often expected to dress up for, that were meant to improve

[19] For a sampling of the innovations and philosophies of these figures, consult: Reid Badger, A Life in Ragtime: A Biography of James Reese Europe (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994); Nancy Milford, Savage Beauty: The Life of Edna St. Vincent Millay (New York: Random House, 2001); Margaret Sanger, Women and the New Race (New York: Brentano's, 1920); Christine Stansell, American Moderns: Bohemian New York and the Creation of a New Century (New York: Henry Holt & Co., 2000): 225-241.

society and make their benefactors look like honorable civic boosters, and indeed they were. But historians have also documented that these elite figures and groups wished to control the spread of culture in a way conducive to creating disciplined non-questioning workers for their corporations.[20] One of the most influential figures of the 19th century who urged that culture be used to edify and uplift rather than merely entertain was the poet and essayist Matthew Arnold. In his article "Civilization in the United States," published soon after his death in 1888, Arnold emphasized a "strain [of culture] tending after the elevated and beautiful," insisting that humans needed such qualities and should strive towards them. He rued that

> In truth everything is against distinction in America, and against the

---

[20] For more details, consult: Ron Chernow, Titan: The Life of John D. Rockefeller, Sr. (New York: Vintage, 1998): 468-471; Neil Harris, Cultural Excursions: Marketing Appetites and Cultural Tastes in Modern America (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1990): 123-124; Theodore Jones, Carnegie Libraries Across America: A Public Legacy (New York: John Wiley & Sons, 1997); Roy Rosenzweig and Elizabeth Blackmar, The Park and the People: A History of Central Park (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1991): Chapters 6-11; Rosenzweig, Eight Hours, Chapter 5.

In earlier examples of his philanthropy, Rockefeller did support organizations such as the conservatively moral-minded Anti-Saloon League and Anthony Comstock's New York Society for the Suppression of Vice, but later after the turn of the century tended to support more generalized causes with less judgmental moral underpinnings, especially in the health field, though his continued support of the Social Gospel movement and its goals in this period clung to, according to Chernow, "an old-fashioned aversion to gambling, prostitution, alcohol and other vices traditionally shunned by Baptists."

> sense of elevation to be gained through admiring end respecting it. The glorification of 'the average man,' who is quite a religion with statesmen and publicists there, is against it. The addiction to 'the funny man,' who is a national misfortune there, is against it.[21]

But, of course, not all culture could be controlled in such a manner. Cinema during the early twentieth-century represented a metastasizing culture that initially erupted from and for the working class and immigrants – it could not be controlled by society's premiere guardians of morality and decorum. Though he would not have used such terms in the mid-1910s, Chaplin's actions reveal him as a modernist and through his often subversive art he quickly became more influential than the pillars of society who dismissed the growing influence of popular culture – no wonder certain standard-bearers of the day warned the public against him and the temptations of popular culture in general. Not that such fading authority figures had a chance of reversing the opinion of anyone who actually enjoyed Chaplin's films. Chaplin's films, like the contemporaneous achievements of various women and people of color, demonstrated that wisdom and insight could emanate from people

---

[21] Matthew Arnold, "Civilization in the United States," The Nineteenth Century (Vol. XXIII, No. 134, April 1888): 486-489, as reproduced by the University of Virginia Library's Electronic Text Center at http://etext.virginia.edu/etcbin/toccer-new2?id=ArnCivi.sgm&images=images/modeng&data=/texts/english/modeng/parsed&tag=public&part=all <accessed 12 March 2015>. Similar widely influential views about the proper role of culture were expressed by Arnold in his earlier books Essays In Criticism (1865) and Culture and Anarchy (1869).

beyond the usual circle of upper-class white males.

Chaplin was not alone in his adaption of this aesthetic. The real world, disturbing and senseless as it often was, had infiltrated the best and most lasting American culture of the time, well before Chaplin's arrival on the scene, in the work of authors such as Kate Chopin, Stephen Crane, and Theodore Dreiser, muckrakers like Jacob Riis and Upton Sinclair, historians such as W. E. B. DuBois, and more.[22] Chaplin shared a link with these kinds of artists. In this so-called progressive era, American life was beginning to be revealed in all of its diversity through these authors and other contemporary cultural influences -- not just the vision of the elite. Chaplin, whether meaning to or not, represented an essential part of this trend in his best films of this era. These reflections of the realities of American life become the source of his greatest work during this decade, and for decades afterward. His engagement with reality, beginning in the Essanay and Mutual years, not only characterized his own rapidly maturing artistic sensibility, but also pointed the way for the motion picture industry to follow in its movement to become a mature artistic medium, attracting all classes to its increasingly profitable products.

---

[22] See, for example: Kate Chopin, The Awakening (Chicago: Herbert S. Stone & Co., 1899); Stephen Crane, The Red Badge of Courage (New York: D. Appleton & Co., 1895); Theodore Dreiser, Sister Carrie (New York: Doubleday, 1900); Jacob Riis, How The Other Half Lives: Studies Among the Tenements of New York (New York: Scribner's, 1890); Upton Sinclair, The Jungle (New York: Doubleday, Jabber & Co., 1906); W. E. B. DuBois, The Souls of Black Folk: Essays and Sketches (Chicago: A.C. McClurg & Co., 1903).

Ancillary products featuring Chaplin started appearing during his year at Essanay, including cartoons and comic strips in newspapers, toys, dolls, books and much more besides. He inspired a group of pale imitators who tried (and almost always failed) to emulate his methods and success in films. His brother Sydney assumed the role as his full-time manager during 1915, trying to control and recoup royalties from all Chaplin ancillary products, but bootleg manufacturers and entrepreneurs had enjoyed too much of a head start, lawsuits probably would have taken years to prosecute and no one knew at the time if Chaplin products would still be profitable when the dust from potential lawsuits finally cleared. Though Chaplin was paid exceedingly well, he did not receive the full rewards of his creation as seen in commercial products – the Beatles in their early years faced a similar situation.[23] But the fact of Chaplin's image appearing on all manner of products must have further riled those who feared his influence in society, especially his championing of the downtrodden, often at the cost of stodgy and powerful figures in society usually viewed as people to emulate.

In addition, during the mid and later Essanay period and within the entire Mutual period, Chaplin's artistic palette and influence would increase as his

---

[23] Chaplin, 172-173; Maland, 10, 11. For more on the Beatles' initial merchandising deals engineered by manager Brian Epstein that vastly undersold their commercial worth, as well as worldwide efforts to bootleg Beatles merchandise, see Bob Spitz, The Beatles: The Biography (New York: Little, Brown & Co., 2005): 464-468.

bittersweet streak emerged, inspiring audiences to laugh and cry simultaneously at his creations, enlarging the emotional scope of what film comedy could encompass. In The Bank (1915), for example, when it becomes clear that the character played by Edna Purviance rejects the Tramp's romantic advances, a sadness and sense of personal loss that all adults have felt sometime in their lives is introduced into a comedy. Chaplin's growth as a filmmaker and actor makes this a powerful moment, signaling not just his emerging maturity, but serving notice that he will be a different kind of filmmaker and comedian. Americans were ready for more of the truth being included in their entertainment, no longer did culture have to be purely edifying and authority-confirming, as the Victorians in the Genteel Tradition tried to maintain it should be.[24] And inserting that kind of emotional, adult, sensual, class-conscious truth into a comedy was, I would argue, an even more surprising and radical a position than Chaplin has been given credit for in the past. Not politically radical, but as a strong affirmative statement against the conformity of the period.

Chaplin's abandoned Essanay film feature Life, as judged from the limited remnants of it still extant, was going to cover a story resembling his own life of poverty growing up in London with alcoholic parents, tragedy and begging, but either he felt it too intense or needed to ponder more about how to present such dire scenarios. He ended up tackling such themes more successfully in films at Mutual. Essanay did not wish to support Chaplin's idea of making a

[24] Maland, 15; Stansell, 147-165.

longer, and thus more expensive, feature film, and though Chaplin's films become more complex, especially in terms of their emotional content at Mutual, he did not produce a feature until years after his contract ended at Mutual. As innovative and forward-moving as he was in this period, he could only develop so fast as an artist, and perhaps felt the audience could only accept so much at a time. Surely, such harrowing scenes enter his films more frequently after he leaves Essanay. One also gets a sense of his boredom in the concluding Essanay films, especially in the very last official release, Charlie Chaplin's Burlesque On Carmen (1915). It is common historical knowledge that he felt dissatisfied with his contract and felt underpaid considering how much money his films brought in. It is possible he was saving his best most personal material for a time when he would be more properly compensated for it and working in a milieu he felt more comfortable in, which was certainly the situation when he moved to Mutual in 1916.

The new more highly developed Chaplin aesthetic flowered still further when Chaplin left Essanay for the Mutual film company in 1916, earning at least ten times more money for his services than at Essanay. Mutual's president didn't mind the expense, maintaining that "This contract is only a new token of the bigness of the motion picture and the motion picture industry, a combination of art, amusement and business. The figures are all business." Indeed they were. The company made much more money than Chaplin on the deal, particularly since Chaplin films lasted and performed longer in the

marketplace than almost any other films. Unlike a drama, audiences viewed them repeatedly, especially young people. Some negative press erupted over Chaplin's huge salary. Chaplin scholar David Robinson claimed he was the highest paid person in the world after signing the Mutual deal, except for possibly the CEO of US Steel (although soon, Mary Pickford would earn even more from producer Adolph Zukor).[25] The mid-1910s represented a period of unemployment, war, and suffering for many. But nevertheless Chaplin's work earned enormous grosses worldwide -- why shouldn't he have had a cut of profits he rightfully brought in?

At the time he signed this new contract, he informed the press of artistic goals for his tenure at Mutual. He now possessed maximum money and control and used it in part to grow as an artist. "I'm going to make better pictures than I did last [year at Essanay]. I am doing my own scenarios and my own directing. We're to have a little more legitimate plots. I like a little story, with maybe an idea in it."[26] Chaplin excised much of his cruder slapstick in this period but kept in the most sophisticated, acrobatic and unexpected slapstick (as seen for example in the bravura opening minutes of The Vagabond or The Adventurer, from 1916 and 1917 respectively). He probably realized that if he did not continue to innovate and develop his art, he would lose his edge and his popularity in the long run. Even more crucially at Mutual, he enhanced his

---

[25] The quote and the figures are from: Robinson, 158-162; Chaplin, 177-179, 187-189.

[26] Robinson, 164.

films' identification with the downtrodden and those usually marginalized or even discriminated against.

Such as immigrants. The Mutual films were released during a time of pronounced anti-semitism and nativism in America. Overall, more than 23 million immigrants arrived in the United States between 1880-1920, the largest group ever to arrive at one time, completely altering the country's social fabric. In the first two decades of the twentieth century alone, over 14 million arrived, particularly from eastern and southern Europe, including 2 million Jews fleeing pogroms and 2 million Italians.[27]

Just as is the case today in the UK and US, many newspapers and media sources vilified immigrants and the countries they came from. Acts of violence against immigrants were common, and legislation passed during the 1910s sought to force literacy on immigrants or relegate them exclusively to certain red-lined neighborhoods (though passed by Congress, presidents usually vetoed these bills). A pre-WW1 economic downturn particularly raised levels of nativism during 1914, inspiring numerous anti-immigrant tracts and even some lynchings of immigrants.[28] Numerous intellectuals, most famously

---

[27] Harvard University Open Collections Program's Aspiration, Acculturation and Impact: Immigration to the United States 1789-1930, accessed at http://ocp.hul.harvard.edu/immigration/timeline.html (11 March 2015).

[28] The most authoritative history of American nativism is John Higham, Strangers In The Land: Patterns of American Nativism 1860-1925 (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University

Madison Grant, argued that the race-mixing represented by immigration would result in "the passing of the great race," the Anglo-Saxons, since millions of immigrants would eventually genetically mix with older-stock Americans.[29] A lot of this conjecture represented obviously out and out racism and ignorant prejudice – particularly since non-British Europeans had been arriving in America in large numbers since at least the 1840s, and the country had gained in economic, industrial and cultural might with every decade. The definitions of race were quite different then -- throughout the 19th-century and even into the 20th, Irish and Jews were often not seen as having a white identity.

Yet, Chaplin's take on this controversial subject rebelled against this fallback position of the period. His 1917 Mutual short The Immigrant humanized immigrants and their struggles to achieve success in their new American environment. They weren't viewed as selfish aliens foraging off society, but as making the best efforts they could under harrowing circumstances and honorably helping each other, as American immigration authorities treated them like cattle. This pro-immigrant pro-ethnic attitude represented no accident -- In 1915, when Chaplin was asked about the persistent and false rumor that he possessed Jewish ancestry, he replied: "I have not that good

---

Press, 2002 [originally published 1955]). Most of the material concerning the 1910s is in Chapter 7.

[29] Madison Grant, The Passing of the Great Race or The Racial Basis of European History (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1936 [originally published 1916]).

fortune."[30]

One of the most important essays of that decade, still taught in U.S. schools today, was Randolph Bourne's "Trans-National America," from 1916.[31] He made the then-controversial argument that immigrants did not corrupt the culture of the United States, but they actually brought new energy and innovation, and represented the reason why the United States by the end of the nineteenth-century had become such an economic powerhouse with more industrial output than Germany, France and the UK put together. In this essay, Bourne also intimated that it would not be beneficial for the American upper-class Anglo-Saxon Victorian culture to dominate life, that the mixing and introduction of cultures and ideas brought by immigrants would ensure the vitality and strength of the U.S., keeping the country from "stagnation." "America shall be what the immigrants have a hand in making it," not the ruling class, Bourne argued. As future events proved, he ended up being correct but then and now, too many people did not accept this argument. Chaplin, through his films, voiced similar arguments about the worth of immigrants as Bourne, and presented such arguments in a medium that everyone could understand, not just elite intellectuals.

---

30 Robinson, 154, 199.

31 Randolph Bourne, "Trans-National America," in Randolph Bourne, War and the Intellectuals: Collected Essays 1915-1919 (Indianapolis, IN: Hackett Publishing, 1999): Chapter 8. Quotes are from pgs. 108-109.

Chaplin's films also presented a unique vision concerning the working-class and the poor in the urban cities of the United States. Chaplin knew these cities, he had toured them in his initial years in America on the vaudeville circuit, and had witnessed their good and bad sides. The 1910s formed a period of great labor unrest, with titanic struggles between not only labor and management but between more established early unions such as the American Federation of Labor, and newer emerging unions, some of them leaning more towards an anti-capitalist sensibility as seen in the case of the International Workers of the World.[32]

As a Sennett employee at the Keystone studio, Chaplin and his fellow company members used to make fun of the police, but in Easy Street (1917), his character exhibited the street wisdom and gravitas to take on the job himself. As he behaves courageously as an untrained policeman surviving on his wits, ridding his dismal urban neighborhood of pests such as a sadistic bully and a lecherous drug addict, Chaplin takes on a mantle of non-traditional authority, carrying it off much more honorably than most authority figures. In this era when Social Darwinism argued that the poor were disadvantaged largely because of some kind of genetic determinism, Chaplin showed time and again that one didn't have to be socially respectable to exhibit character and bravery. The Tramp's saving of numerous people from drowning in The

---

[32] For more details on these struggles, consult: Nelson Lichtenstein, State of the Union: A Century of Organized Labor (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2003); Joseph A. McCartin, Labor's Great War: The Struggle For Industrial Democracy and the Origins of Modern American Labor Relations (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1997).

Adventurer represents another example of this quality in Chaplin's work, as does the distrust that the Tramp inspires in The Floorwalker (1916), when it is actually the management of the store that the Tramp is working in that are robbing the store blind.

A similar argument could be made concerning another Chaplin Mutual classic, The Vagabond. While most in traditional Victorian society looked down upon tramps, the Little Tramp's behavior is quite respectable in the context of the period, as far as he can make it so. Edna plays a kidnapped drudge Charlie runs into by chance on a country road. Chaplin serenades her with his violin in a simultaneously heart-tugging and slapstick-filled scene, and says: "I ought to do good here." One is not sure if he means that he hopes to make a profit from playing his instrument for tips, or plans to "do good" by rescuing Edna from exploiting gypsies who whip and yell at her. The Tramp must have realized by looking at the gypsies' isolated living situation that they had little or no money to give him, so it seems logical that he meant to risk his own well-being to better Edna's calamitous situation. And the Tramp is nearly drowned for his troubles by her main oppressor before Edna saves the Tramp in return.

Also in The Vagabond, even though the Tramp is a hobo with few resources, he makes moves to try to take care of Edna and provide a respectable Victorian-like existence. After their escape, he sleeps separately from Edna, allowing her the more comfortable trailer while he sleeps outside in the open air, taking no liberties with her. He's very caring, scrubbing her face in a motherly and hilarious way when she emerges from the trailer in the morning,

showing courtesy and respect for cleanliness. He sets their breakfast table as well as he can, ingeniously using a shirt as a tablecloth, folding the sleeves up so they resemble napkins. Yet it's clear that for all his courtesy, he is also oblivious to social niceties and skills, as he breaks their breakfast eggs with a hammer. Later, when a portrait of Edna by a passing painter alerts her upper-class mother to her whereabouts, she along with the painter rush to the gypsy wagon to rescue Edna. The mother offers the Tramp money for taking care of her daughter, but he's not interested. In the scenes featuring the painter stealing Edna's attention from the Tramp and her mother taking Edna away in a car, Chaplin exhibits his most effective acting in the Mutual films. The Tramp is crestfallen, communicating this in a subtle way, deftly avoiding the overacting common in silent films of this time, particularly comedies. He hurts and we hurt with him. He performs a short dance feigning indifference as Edna's mother's car leaves him behind and alone, trying to deny the pain he feels, but it's obviously not working, as he puts his hand to his stomach as if sick. Who is the vagabond now? Who lives the respectable life as judged by actions? With the supposedly lowly Tramp displaying an honorable chivalry and bravery in The Vagabond, Chaplin reverses traditional social roles, and by doing so, makes his audience question notions of typical propriety. At the end, the car comes back to retrieve him, and we have a somewhat rare happy ending for a Chaplin film of this period. In this film and others from the Mutual period, Chaplin established a bittersweet poignance probably unprecedented for silent comedies, elevating his art as well as its social significance.

In his autobiography, Chaplin looked back at his two years at Mutual with

affection and warmth. "Fulfilling the Mutual contract, I suppose, was the happiest period of my career," he wrote. "I was light and unencumbered, twenty-seven years old, with fabulous prospects and a friendly, glamorous world before me." Mutual wanted to sign another contract with him, and even offered a million dollars for eight more films (over $18 million in today's dollars), but Chaplin yearned for even more independence and eventually a chance to make features, and moved on to the First National film company.[33]

Through this brief depiction of Chaplin's historical themes during the Essanay and Mutual years, it can be traced how Chaplin became personally and artistically acclimated in the United States, starting to assess and engage with the political, economic and social environment of his new home. His best work, from the mid-1910s forward, would result when he connected with these themes, when he moved away from the pure slapstick of the Sennett years and engaged with real life issues within the Little Tramp's world – not just political ones but emotional ones as well. His comedy reflected the rancor and divisions of the period, concerning labor, class, immigration, the poor, women, substance abuse and more – I would argue that one cannot fully appreciate, understand and feel the history of this period without looking at the work of the most famous human being in the world at the time. A century later, we are quite rightly still looking at him, discovering more all the time.

[33] Chaplin, 188; Robinson, 221.

Harvey G. Cohen, Senior Lecturer in the Department of Culture, Media and Creative Industries at King's College London, is also the author of Duke Ellington's America (University of Chicago Press, 2010), named one of the best books of the year by the *Washington Post*.